



RHODE ISLAND DEFIES THE "WELFARE MAGNET" MODEL

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families' (TANF) enactment allowed states flexibility to create their own programs to meet the needs of their own citizens, within certain parameters. One concern about this flexibility was that states with less stringent work requirements or greater cash benefits would attract poor people to their state, causing it to become a "Welfare Magnet" state.

Several states sought to discourage potential welfare migration by including residency rules in their welfare reform legislation. These rules generally limited cash benefits for families who had not lived in the state for a prescribed period of time. Other states, including Rhode Island, created a two-tier level of payment based upon length of residency, which granted a lower benefit level to recent arrivals in their state. The U.S. Supreme Court subsequently declared that such restrictions unconstitutionally limit people's right to travel.

Rhode Island had similar concerns about "in-migration", and instituted a method to gather and

track information about people who recently moved to Rhode Island and applied for Family Independent Program (FIP) cash benefits. Three questions were added to the information gathered at the time of application: 1) Did you recently move to Rhode Island? 2) If yes, where did you move from? 3) What was your reason for moving to Rhode Island? This information has been collected for the last 8 years.

As Figure 1 below shows, in 1995, 18.9% of all newly accepted families who receive FIP cash assistance were from locations other than Rhode Island. In 2002, the percentage of all new FIP families who moved to Rhode Island from out-of-state is only 9.2%, or a decrease of 51.3% from 1995 to 2002.

Also of note is that the top four states families move from when they come to Rhode Island has remained virtually unchanged from 1996 to 2002 (pre- and post-welfare reform). See Figure 2 below.

Figure 1 In-Migration: New FIP Cases from Other States 1995-2002

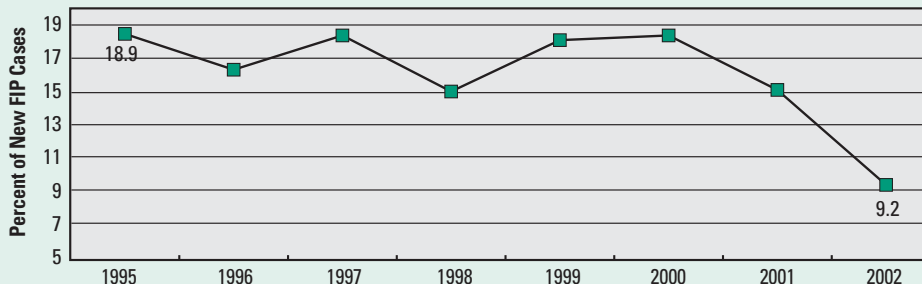
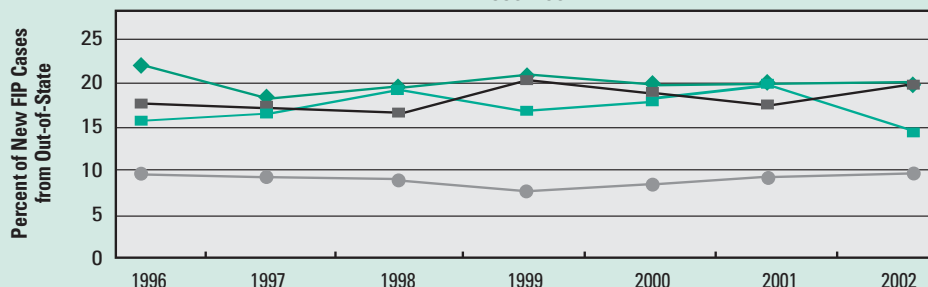


Figure 2 Top Four Locations That Families Move From 1996-2002



◆ Mass.
■ Puerto Rico
■ New York
● Florida



A NEW CONCEPT: WELFARE AS A TEMPORARY BENEFIT

STATE AND FEDERAL WELFARE REFORM: TWO DIFFERENT VIEWS

Rhode Island's welfare reform law, the Family Independence Act (FIA), focuses on families improving their economic well-being through work while at the same time assuring that children would be no worse off than they were prior to welfare reform. FIA framers were concerned that arbitrary time limits might leave children unprotected in cases where their parents were either unwilling or unable to find a job before the end of their benefit entitlement period. Because of this, FIA did not mandate time limits on welfare benefits. It did, however, specify that if federal law ever required time limits, adults should be limited to a lifetime maximum of 60 months or 5 years. FIA specified that time limits in Rhode Island should not apply to minor children.

Federal welfare reform, subsequently enacted on 8/22/96, and called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) prohibited any household (all members) which includes an adult who has received benefits for 60 months from eligibility for further cash assistance using federal funds. States were still, however, able to exercise maximum flexibility in designing their welfare programs. TANF provided for 20% of the caseload to receive benefits beyond 60 months on the basis of hardship. States could also structure programs that separated state and federal funding if they had good policy reasons for extending benefits beyond 60 months.

IMPLEMENTATION OF FIA TIME LIMITS IN RI

When an adult reaches their 60-month lifetime limit, their portion is deducted from the monthly check while the children continue to receive cash assistance.

SOME FIP PARENTS REACH THEIR TIME LIMIT

As of October 2002, a total of 90 parents reached their time limits in the FIP program.

Within the first 6 months after FIP time limits went into effect, from May through October 2002, all parents reaching their time limits were contacted by their FIP Social Worker to see if they needed an extension due to hardship or needed more help obtaining a job.

Of the parents reaching time limits from May through October 2002:

- 91% have a 12th grade education or less
- 27% are working
- 42 % have a family size of three or greater
- 52 % live in subsidized housing
- 84% of parent's primary language is English
- 15% are sanctioned (had their benefits reduced for not cooperating)

In addition, the Family Independence Program (FIP) offers opportunities for extensions of the time limits beyond 60 months when the parent has a temporary hardship. It also recognizes that there are ongoing circumstances beyond the parents' control which could exempt parents from having months counted against their time limits. Finally, there are incentives for parents who make sincere efforts to work and are still not making enough to be ineligible for welfare, by "stopping the clock." A single parent who is employed 30 hours a week (35 hours in two-parent households) does not exhaust their benefits as long as they keep working. FIP mandates the process of how months are counted against a parent's time limit. That is, every household receives a family needs and employability assessment so that an employment plan can be developed to assist the parent to prepare for work and to get a job. A parent's time limited benefits do not begin until they have a chance to understand the rules and an employment plan is signed.

TIME LIMITS: EXEMPTIONS AND EXTENSIONS

Reasons for Exemptions to the FIP Time Limit:

- Parent/adult in household is over age 59
- Parent is ill/ incapacitated and cannot work
- Parent is needed fulltime to care for a child with a disability

Reasons for Temporary Extensions of the Time Limits:

- Parent works less than 30 hours because of a physical or mental condition
- Parent needs additional months to complete a training program, ESL, or literacy course
- Family is homeless when they reach 60 months

Rhode Island is one of only five states that do not impose time limits on children. The other states are Maine, California, Indiana, and Maryland.



HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

THE CRISIS

The lack of affordable housing for low-income families in Rhode Island has reached extreme proportions. In Providence, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment exceeds \$904 per month. DHS data shows that the average rent for a FIP family is \$472 per month in unsubsidized housing and \$153 per month in subsidized housing. With the average cash assistance payment for a family of three on FIP at \$554 per month, it's easy to see how difficult obtaining safe, adequate housing can be for low-income families. And furthermore, only 32% of FIP families are receiving some type of housing subsidy (either public housing or Section 8).

DHS COLLABORATION AND SERVICES

DHS provides leadership and services in many housing areas that directly and indirectly help FIP clients. The Department has developed strong relationships with housing service providers, both public and private, and is instrumental in the development of statewide policy and programs in this area.

DHS works cooperatively with the following agencies and organizations on housing and homelessness issues to respond to the increasing need for emergency shelter.

RI Emergency Food and Shelter Board
RI Housing Resources Commission
RI Housing
Travelers Aid
The RI Coalition for the Homeless
United Way
local churches
and others

Additionally, DHS provides housing retention/homelessness prevention services through the Emergency Housing Assistance Program, which can provide funds to families to prevent eviction or can help families obtain new housing.

DHS' direct service staff provide case management services to FIP clients and assist clients with complex housing issues. DHS has four "Housing Service Workers" with special expertise in the housing area.

Through contractual relationships, DHS continues to enhance and support the emergency homeless shelter system. In addition, the Department has recently expanded the availability of housing services to lead-poisoned children and their families through community-based Lead Centers.

DHS has implemented policies that reflect an awareness of the impact housing insecurity and homelessness has on low-income Rhode Islanders. These include:

- Retaining homeless families on FIP beyond their 60-month time limit if necessary and
- Recognition of "Housing Search" as an approved work activity for homeless families

These policies represent acknowledgement of the unique difficulties that homeless families encounter on their road to economic well-being.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Distributes over \$2,000,000 in Title XX funds to emergency shelters and other housing service providers annually
- Facilitates regular forums for shelter providers to enhance coordination of statewide housing resources
- Compiles weekly statistics on the number of adults and families that use homeless shelters throughout the state. Statistics compiled by DHS are accepted and used statewide for the development of policy.
- Published extensive Housing Resources brochure that is available for staff, providers, and clients
- Trained DHS staff on lead and homelessness issues
- Provides funds for the RI Emergency Food and Shelter Board (through Travelers Aid) to publish Rhode Island's Annual Report on Homelessness



RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD: IT'S MORE THAN JUST MONEY

The importance of a father's involvement in his children's lives has long been a neglected piece in crafting policies to make strong, stable families. For years, policy only focused on making fathers pay child support through increasingly tougher penalties for not doing so. They were all viewed simply as "deadbeat dads" -dads who weren't fulfilling their responsibility to their children.

Research over the past 20 years has revealed a lot about non-custodial fathers. Studies have shown that:

- Many of these fathers are poor and barely able to support themselves.
- More than 80% of low-income fathers earn less than \$10,000 per year.
- Many also grew up without their own fathers, thus lack knowledge of what the role of a good father is.
- They think that if they cannot provide financial support, they have no worth, and stay away from their children out of shame.
- They lack the education and training necessary to get and keep a job.
- Many have other obstacles such as poor physical or mental health, substance abuse, and criminal records.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT CHILDREN IN RHODE ISLAND?

In 2001, 74% of families receiving Family Independence Program cash assistance were headed by a single mother. As a condition of eligibility, these mothers must cooperate with Child Support Enforcement in locating the father and pursuing financial support for their children. However, as the research has shown, fathers who lack the education and skills to hold down a job are unable to comply with even a minimal order for child support.

OTHER IMPACTS

The research also shows the non-financial impact of a father's absence in his children's lives. These non-economic costs include children who are: more likely to do poorly in educational achievement, develop emotional problems, engage in substance abuse, become teen parents at a much higher rate than children from two-parent families, experience violence, and for the boys, become violent as men.

WORKING TOGETHER

In 2001, the RI Departments of Human Services, Administration/Child Support Enforcement, and Labor & Training/Rapid Job Entry Program collaborated on how to get fathers to become more responsible for their children, both financially and emotionally. This combined approach is critical,

as child support is more likely to be paid when enforcement strategies are combined with job training and job retention for the non-custodial father.

In the United States, 73% of parents who had either joint custody or visiting privileges paid child support, compared to only 36% who did not have any regular contact.

The office of Child Support Enforcement now contacts the father, and if he is willing to support his children but lacks the ability to do so, will recommend that the RI Family Court refer him to the Rapid Job Entry program. The staff will assess his abilities, provide short-term training, help in job placement, and provide follow-up support for up to 6 months. The RI Family Court works cooperatively to support this program by suspending the child support order as long as the father participates in the Rapid Job Entry program.

This strategy has had some measure of success. However, it has become evident to those working with these fathers that there are many who have such low-level reading and math skills, none or very little previous work history, and who don't understand some of the basic rules of the workplace, that a more intensive program is needed.

An ideal approach would combine education and training, parenting skills, and social service supports to address any other barriers to working and parenting, while giving some relief from ever-accruing child support obligation. This approach could also include fathers in prison, which are estimated to be about 46% of the incarcerated population. (ACI report)

FATHER & FAMILY NETWORK OF RI IS FORMED

All three state agencies above are members of the Father & Family Network of Rhode Island, a group representative of 65 state agencies, community groups, non-profit agencies, and faith-based organizations. The Network's mission is to promote strong, committed, responsible fatherhood throughout the state.

RI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES PASSES RESOLUTION

In support of this new way of thinking about non-custodial fathers, at the request of the Father & Family Network of Rhode Island, on May 21, 2002, the RI House of Representatives unanimously passed House Resolution H-8165 inviting the National Council of State Legislatures to Rhode Island to present to lawmakers its program "Connecting Low-Income Fathers and Families: A Guide to Practical Policies." It is hoped that this will be the beginning of a strong responsible fatherhood initiative in Rhode Island.